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In commemoration of Mrs. Baron Géza Fejérváry, Dr. Aranka Mária Lángh (1898–1988)

by
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Mrs. Baron Géza Fejérváry, Dr. Aranka Mária Lángh, a celebrated representative of Hungarian and international zoology and herpetology was born 100 years ago, and died 10 years ago. These two anniversaries provide a good opportunity for commemorating her life, her 30 years long scientific career as a herpetologist, and her role as a popularizer of science and as a museologist. All the more so, since this has not been done previously. I feel that taking this task upon me is my duty, as she was my direct predecessor, the curator and collection manager of the Herpetology Collection, accepting me, a freshly graduated museologist on 1 July 1950 on a ministerial scholarship, and, additionally, making me, as a new researcher of the State Natural History Museum (now Hungarian Natural History Museum) acquainted with the valuable collection, in which her husband, Dr. Baron Géza Gyula Fejérváry, and his famous predecessor, Dr. Lajos Méhely were doing their even internationally well-known research.

Aranka Mária Lángh was born on 18 April 1898 in a middle-class family. Her interest in nature, and in animals in particular, became obvious already in her childhood, even though she received no particular encouragement from her family. Her father, Dr. Gyula Lángh was a lawyer, the main task of her mother, Flóra Löwl was, besides housekeeping, to provide a warm, homely environment. Her love of and attraction to animals was probably based on frequent excursions and the experiences of her collecting trips.

She continued her studies at the secondary school "M. kir. Állami Felsőbb Leányiskola és Leánygimnázium" (= Hungarian Royal State Highschool and Lyceum for Girls) on Andrássy Street in Budapest, and graduated in 1915. In the Autumn of the same year she signed for natural history-geography at the Liberal Arts (Philosophy) Faculty of the Pázmány Péter University in Budapest. As a first-year student, she got to know the then assistant of the Zoological Faculty, and her to-be husband and co-worker, Baron Géza Gyula Fejérváry, who was to turn her interest towards animals, particularly amphibians and reptiles. When Fejérváry returned from the University to the Zoological Department of the Hungarian National Museum (now Department of Zoology of the Hungarian Natural History Museum), also Aranka Mária Lángh – as Fejérváry's future wife – accompanied him to the Herpetological Collection of the Museum on 26 October 1916, first as a voluntary, "unpaid" assistant. She made her basic examinations as a teacher in 1917. She was still a student when her first systematic and faunistic paper appeared in the museum's Annales for the year 1917. In this she discussed five amphibian species from northern Hungary on the basis of Dr. Sándor Pongrácz's collections made in July 1916 around Lubló (Szepes County). In the same year, on 5 October 1917, she gave her first presentation at the Zoological Section ("Állattani Szakosztály") with the title "On the rudimentary ribs of anu-

rans". In this study, published both in Hungarian and German, she provided details of her osteological examinations on members of seven families of frogs. Contrary to Boulenger, who was at that time considered the major expert in herpetology, she found that not only species of the family Discoglossidae, but "sämtliche Anuren weisen Rippen auf, der Unterschied liegt bloß darin, inwiefern die Rippen in den einzelnen Gruppen ihren ursprünglichen, selbständigen Character bewahrt haben" (p. 128).

On the third day following her first presentation at the Zoological Section (8 October 1917), she married Géza Gyula Fejérváry, in the meantime appointed to the rank of assistant curator, in the "Fasori Evangélikus Templom" (= Fasor Lutheran Church). Two years later, in 1919, she made her doctoral (summa cum laude) examination in palaeontology (major), and geology and cosmology, and as such, she was the first "doctor of palaeontology". At this time, "palaeontology as a major subject" ... "was only offered at a few universities in Europe". At least this is what was made known to the author by the academician Dr. Elemér Vadász, then professor of the Geological Department, in a letter dated 2 October 1969.

Between 1920 and 1922, she gave birth to two children (son Zsolt and daughter Aranka). The joy of childbirth was associated with newer and newer professional recognitions. In 1921 she published two papers in the Viennese "Verhandlungen". One contained her observations on the biology, ethology and ecology of five European brown frogs (*Rana fuscae*), the other dealt with hybrids of the clawed frog species *Xenopus calcaratus* and *X. muelleri.* The latter were also the subject of her second scientific presentation at the Zoological Section held on February 4th. In the same year, on 27 August she was given the rank of museum curator, and a year later, on 14 October 1922 she was actually appointed to museum curator. In January 1923, she held her third speech at the previously mentioned Zoological Section with the title "The occurrence of *Molge cristata* Laur. subsp. *Karelini* Strauch in Baranya County". In this she discussed a juvenile specimen collected in the vicinity of Baranyavár that showed a strong resemblance to the southern subspecies of the Crested Newt in great detail. Its taxonomic position was, however, only clarified a few months later in the museum's Annales. In the university year 1922–23, besides taking care of her two small children, she studied medicine at the Erzsébet University, Pécs, at that time functioning (located) in Budapest. Between 22 and 29 September 1923, together with her husband, she participated at the congress of the "Palaeontologische Gesellschaft" held in Vienna. And, also in the year 1923, her magnum opus, a nearly 100 pages long work, which only partly encompassed her thesis, entitled "Beiträge zu einer Monographie der fossilen Ophisaurier" was published in the first volume of Palaeontologia Hungarica. After her doctoral examinations, she incorporated the results of newer investigations, five beautifully illustrated plates and 43 figures, before submitting this work for publication. The valuable results of this study cannot be discussed in detail here. However, the exhausting historical and critical review of the fossil and Recent slender glass lizard (*Ophisaurus*) species, and the careful description of the skull bones, the cervical and caudal vertebrae, and the ribs and osteoderms should definitely be mentioned, plus her statement made on the basis of her studies that the existence of only two well-established *Ophisaurus* species can be substantiated: the geologically older *Ophisaurus moguntinus* Boettger and its direct descendant, *Ophisaurus pannonicus* Kormos, which was, according to her, the ancestor of the Recent *Ophisaurus apus* (Pallas) (currently valid name *Ophisaurus apodus* [Pallas]). She wrote: "Durch die Feststellung dieser Tatsache ist also unsere phyletische Wissenschaft um die Kenntnis einer euthygenetischen Reihe reicher geworden" ... "als relativ sehr wenige handgreiflich nachweisbare Ahnenreihen bekannt sind". Her apparently well-founded assump-

Dr. Aranka Mária Lángh
in 1956

tion that "auch die Gattung *Ophisaurus* im westlichen Europa entstand, und von dort nach dem Osten zog, ebenso wie dies durch G. J. v. Fejérváry [...] die Varaniden betreffend gezeigt wurde" (p. 215), should also be mentioned.

She resigned from her paid position in September 1924, as she was "forced to ask for" her reclassification to the B List due to reduction of staff because of her good family conditions. However, as a volunteer, she continued to work at the Museum. Previously, on July 19 she already offered in writing to the "Zoological Department of the Hungarian National Museum" her herpetological collection of European and exotic taxa, containing several rarities and filling two normal size cabinets that she valued at 1500 Dollars.

Four years later, in Spring 1928, when her husband led a six-weeks expedition to Malta and neighbouring islands, she accompanied him and collected amphibians and reptiles together with Dr. Gyula Kieselbach.

On June 2, 1932, her husband suddenly died. She and her two small children (aged 12 and 10 years) found themselves without support from one day to another, and she returned to her beloved museum due to the altered family conditions. She rejoined the staff of the museum as a curator (see the minutes of the 335. session of the Zoological Section), and took over the management of the Herpetological Collection. Widowed at a young age (at 34 years) she picked up the scientific lead "dropped" about eight years earlier with enormous force. In her old and new position she primarily focussed on editing her husband's five incomplete works, which she supplemented on the basis of his notes, and made ready for publication. During her work between 1932 and 1935, and even 1936, she intensely studied the herpetological literature, but did not start working on new subjects. However, she produced a number of high-quality popular articles in this period. These papers mainly dealt with boid and viperid snakes, varanid and lacertid lizards, and chelonians and crocodilians, while only a few had the life and development of newts and frogs as a subject. From the earliest years of her restart on, and especially in the subsequent time she collected amphibians and reptiles from different parts of the country with enormous devotion. Her idea was to produce a faunistic catalogue of the species inhabiting the Carpathian Basin listing their distribution data, sim-

ilarly to Méhely's work published 25 years earlier, in 1918, in Fauna Regni Hungariae. Her article, containing a short historical and a substantial literature review, was published in 1943 with the title "Beiträge und Berichtigungen zum Amphibien/Reptilien-Teil des ungarischen Faunenkataloges" in the journal Fragmenta Faunistica Hungarica.

On January 1, 1939 she was given the rank of Museum Curator 1st Class, and on 1 July she actually became Museum Curator 1st Class. In 1943 she took part in the systematical faunistic surveys of North Transylvania reannexed in 1940, and extensively collected amphibians and reptiles, and studied their habitats in three counties (Csík, Háromszék and Maros-Torda). Her results and experiences were published one year later in a paper entitled "Data to the herpetofauna of Transylvania". In 1944 she published another article in which, besides discussing metrical and numerical characteristics of two melanistic grass snakes collected in the Kuk Alps (Máramaros County), she dealt with taxonomical and biological problems associated with them.

Since her son, as an artillery officer, left to the West in 1944, and at this time her daughter was abroad as well, she had to experience the storming raid of the Hungarian capital all in herself. Her flat was bombed in January 1945. Then, as the warden of the State Natural History Museum's building in the Baross Street, she moved to a room in the museum. At the end of the war, besides her task as a curator and warden, she was appointed to organizing and supervising exhibitions as an independent museologist. During the war, the rich herpetological collections were moved to the basement; their re-incorporating and their arranging into cabinets occupied much of her time. Besides completely and conscienctiously fulfilling these tasks, she barely had the time for conducting original research. So she only produced two papers until Autumn 1951. At the end of the same year, the newly introduced serious financial restrictions forced her to leave the museum. Subsequently, she wrote three additional popular articles before leaving Hungary.

On 13 October 1956, ten days before the October Revolution, at the age of 58 years she arrived to her daughter's home in Melide, Switzerland, with an official emmigration passport. (Of her years spent abroad I can make report thanks to communications with her daughter. For detailed information I am deeply indebted to her.)

After a short stay in Melide, she flew to her son, in the meantime living in Maracaibo, Venezuela, in April 1957. There she enjoyed the love of her family and four grandchildren. Because she wanted to be understood by the children, she started to learn Spanish. She often made excursions sometimes with her grandchildren, but more usually alone: she collected amphibians, reptiles, snails and beetles. After spending eight years in Venezuela, she returned to her daughter in Europe. She presented the zoological collections she had taken with her to the Natural History Museum in Lugano, and offered her cooperation in determining this material. She often made excurions and collected also in Melide. She read a lot, especially literature related to biology. Sometimes an old acquaintance or friend from Budapest or Hungary visited her. During her stay in Switzerland her femur was successfully operated.

After 18 years, in August 1983, she again left for Venezuela with her doctor's permission, and spent the subsequent time in Maracaibo. The majority of her time was occupied by her great grandchildren. Occasionally, she had contacts with Dr. Ferenc Werner, a veterinarian of Hungarian descendant and his family. Her health was satisfactory until 1986, not considering a few minor illnesses related to age. At this time, circulatory trouble arose, and her left leg had to be amputated above the knee in Maracaibo in 1987. Because of her protracted age, she needed more and more help and care, so her son put her in a home for elderly operated by nuns. She died of heart failure on 23 May 1988, at the age of 90. She was laid to eternal rest in Maracaibo.

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